

Backfire snag stumps panel discussing SALT

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Washington—The Senate Foreign Relations Committee began shaping SALT II for ratification yesterday and promptly bogged down over how to treat the Soviet Backfire bomber.

The question is one of several critical to Senate approval of the strategic arms limitation treaty. It centers on whether to require the Soviet Union to formalize the restraints on the Backfire that it has promised informally.

Action was deferred as it became clear that several moderate senators, whose positions may be decisive, favored the firm commitment. Administration officials proposed a secret session of the committee to work out details.

The Backfire became a point of contention as the committee began at least a week of so-called "mark-up" sessions. The sessions entail line-by-line consideration of the treaty and its related documents, and ultimately will prepare the package for Senate floor debate.

What happens to SALT in the process could determine whether it receives the 67 votes—two-thirds of the Senate—necessary for ratification.

With only brief discussion, the committee attached two reservations yesterday.

One, offered by Senators Frank Church (D, Idaho), the committee chairman, and Jacob K. Javits (R, N.Y.), the senior Republican, was essentially technical. It merely imparts to a long list of Soviet-American understandings about the meaning of treaty language the same weight as the treaty itself.

Since the list was signed earlier by Soviet officials, no one expected argument from Moscow on that point. The same was true of a reservation from Senator George McGovern (D, S.D.) reinforcing both governments' avowed goal of making deep cuts in nuclear arsenals in future negotiations.

But the Backfire problem was more ticklish. The bomber was omitted from the constraints of the strategic arms limitation treaty after Soviet officials refused to treat it as a long-range weapon capable of hitting the United States.

But many American critics of SALT insisted it should be included. As a compromise gesture, Soviet President Leonid I. Brezhnev gave President Carter assurances, partly orally and partly in an unsigned document, that the production rate of the Backfire would not be increased and that the bomber would not be equipped to strike the United States.

Soviet officials continued to insist that the Backfire was a medium-range, not long-range, bomber. And they refused to comment formally on American claims—which the administration says are a correct—that they are producing 30 Backfires a year.

Mr. Church and Mr. Javits, judging the Senate mood about Backfire, had submitted earlier a reservation that treated the informal Soviet assurances as a commitment.

Mr. Church made it clear he expected the reservation to be adopted in a way that would require Soviet leaders to accept it, thus making the formal commitment they had rejected earlier. "We are supplying the missing signature," the senator declared.

But the language of the reservation apparently was not strong enough for several committee members, including John H. Glenn (D, Ohio) and Charles H. Percy (R, Ill.). As the discussion became more intense, the administration intervened.

Lloyd N. Cutler, the White House counsel, suggested that the delay proposed by Mr. Church was a good idea. In fact, he said, it might be easier to discuss the problem in a secret session.

The administration apparently had hoped to attach the reservation in a way requiring only tacit, not direct, Soviet acquiescence. Such indirection is not rare in delicate negotiations.